Come Together

Only collective action in small-scale fisheries can overcome the problems of poverty, marginalization, insecure tenure rights and powerlessness

Sometimes an academic paper is especially known for its intriguing title, like the one by Chris Béné, which stated that small-scale fisheries "rhymes with poverty". He not only referred to the fact that small-scale fishers and fishworkers are poor, often extremely so. He also alluded to the way they are generally perceived; the image of small-scale fishing as "an occupation of last resort", that is, what people do when they have no other alternative to sustain themselves. Small-scale fishers and fishworkers, therefore, need assistance to free themselves from their dismal predicament, to get out of the industry, and into some other employment. This would be good for themselves, but also for the economy and the environment, because the definition of the problem is that there are "too many fishers chasing too few fish." The assumption is that poor people are also bad stewards. Removing them from this industry would, therefore, be a win-win situation. For policymakers, it then makes sense to help speed up their exit.

It is rather amazing how we let images govern our governing, how easily we are seduced by metaphors, like the most famous one brought forward by Garrett Hardin about the "Tragedy of the Commons", which is the root metaphor of modern fisheries management. The issue is not that it is intriguing, or that he does not have a good point. Nor is he necessarily wrong – if we look at the evolving tragedy as a mathematical equation. Rather, the problem is, as Elinor Ostrom pointed out, that it leads to "panaceas", to quick fixes that are applied universally, in situations where they do not fit. Then we end up using "hammers to paint the floor", which was the metaphor used in a paper I published in Marine Policy some years ago with a group of Danish and US colleagues.

The irony is that these fixes were in fact what Hardin warned against, but that tends to go under the radar of those who cite him. Everyone remembers what he said about "the freedom in the commons" that "brings ruin to all". But what he really argued was that there are some societal problems that do not have scientific or technical solutions, because they challenge our morality and ethics. Poverty is one of them. These are problems that Rittel and Webber called "wicked problems" in a famous article that came out in 1973, five years after Garrett Hardin's article. Also Rittel and Webber used poverty as an example of what they were talking about.

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I think it would be prudent first to check if small-scale fisheries are always synonymous with poverty, if it is really true that small-scale fisheries are necessarily an occupation of last resort and never a preferred occupation. Wouldn't it be wise, before one clamps down on them, to explore empirically how big a threat on marine resources and ecosystems small-scale fisheries really are? Is it really true that small-scale fishing people are deemed to live in poverty at the margins or society, as Hardin would presumably predict? What is interesting and important, is that all those 150-plus states that endorsed the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale

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Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) do not seem to believe that this is the case, if we should take their word for it.

We should, of course, make no mistake about it: small-scale fisheries are indeed ridden with problems like poverty, marginalization, insecure tenure rights, and powerlessness, which are all at the centre of the SSF Guidelines. But they also have opportunities and potentials waiting for enabling policies, good governance and collective action. Then we need first to get rid of those images and metaphors that are limiting our ideas of what the problems and solutions are, and which are legitimizing policies that are blind to context. Why not then start with exploring how people in small-scale fisheries themselves understand their predicament, how they cope with the problems they experience, and how they pursue the opportunities as they see them? How do they deal with the challenge of living poorly in an environment which they themselves risk ruining if they do not think hard on how to avoid it? We should not assume that people are sitting idle because they are poor, or that they are poor because they are idle.

Self-governance capacities and capabilities in small-scale fisheries locally can be built systematically over time

These are exactly the questions that we set out to investigate back in 2008 when starting the PovFish project, which, among other things, led to the book *Poverty Mosaics: Realities and Prospects in Small-Scale Fisheries*, published by Springer in 2011. The book contains case studies of small-scale fisheries around the world, and provides a nuanced picture of the diverse situations that people in this industry find themselves in. Small-scale fisheries are not the same globally; they exist in circumstances, also politically, which differ a lot. Poverty also involves a lot of things, and means different things to different people. That is why we used the term "poverty mosaics". The idea that there is one simple remedy to their problems is flawed.

Policies, and the governing mechanisms that they generate, must be as nuanced, diverse, adapted, and dynamic as small-scale fisheries are. This, we argue, requires governance according to the "dexterity principle", that is, attention to details, and governance by your fingers rather than your thumbs. Such governance requires knowledge of particularities, of context, but also governance that is inclusive, interactive, and co-operative. No one knows their context better than those who live in it. No one has the local ecological and social knowledge that you need to have to govern well, like those who live with the problems and opportunities that exist.

There is obviously need for supportive infrastructure, like legal frameworks and macroeconomic policies. But there are limits to how governable small-scale fisheries are from a distance. Rather, governance of small-scale fisheries should follow the 'subsidiarity principle': what can be governed locally, should also be governed locally. The fact that the organizational capacity for self-governance on that level is often poor, does not suggest that they can never be governed there. Self-governance capacities and capabilities in small-scale fisheries locally can be built systematically over time. This has happened in numerous instances around the world, with mixed success, one may add, as the Poverty Mosaics book and subsequent publications also show.

Collective action

Such capacities and capabilities require organizations whose building and functioning are a matter of collective learning and action. Theories of collective action suggest that communities need a push sometimes; they need help, as there is often lack of resources and a tendency of free riding, as Mancur Olson pointed out in his famous book about collective action. Particularly, in the initial

stage of collective action, civil society organizations and (local) government can play an important role. Building organizations – co-operatives, for instance – is bound to be a trial-and-error affair, because they need to be adapted to a dynamic context and cannot be imposed from afar, which is a reason why they failed in many instances.

I believe that academics have a contribution to make to collective learning – in this case, about collective action in small-scale fisheries. Our Poverty Mosaics book is just one of many efforts that have been made to bring the discourse about small-scale fisheries up from the level of simplistic metaphors and quick fixes, and into thick description and interactive governance that is nuanced and contextually embedded.

Most of all, I think academics can help reduce the tendency of 'spurious learning', where metaphors often make us jump to conclusions. When resources are overfished and marine ecosystem are eroded, it may well be for the reasons that Garrett Harding described, but it may also have other causes. We cannot know what actually happened before we have looked closely into the situation.

When co-operatives fail to live up to expectations, it may also be for other reasons than that they are co-operatives. Enterprises that are built on private business models fail too, and co-operatives can stumble for the same reasons that they do, like poor management. But co-operatives are, no doubt, complex organizations because they are meant to serve a broad range of functions in addition to business. Firms that operate from a narrow profit model, have it easier than co-operatives that also take responsibility for the wellbeing of members and communities.

Co-management, which is another form of organized collective action, has met some of the same criticisms that co-operatives have. People refer to examples they know or have heard of, where co-management flopped. They think that co-management is the essential reason and not how it was actually done. In an article in SAMUDRA Report, titled "The Devil is in the Detail", I argued that co-management fails when their particular designs are flawed relative to the context and demands. To avoid spurious learning, one should, therefore, in accordance with the dexterity principle, first check the design details and the context before concluding that co-management cannot work.

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Fishers getting ready for a fishing trip in Kerala, India. Policies, and the governing mechanisms that the governments generate, must be as nuanced, diverse, adapted, and dynamic as SSF are

But if the devil is in the details, where is god? God, I argue, is in the principles, like in the classic Rochdale principles for co-operatives from 1844. If you check them out, you will see that they read very much like the guiding principles in the SSF Guidelines, and they work equally as well for fisheries co-operatives as for fisheries co-management.

If we are to collectively address the dilemmas that poverty alleviation involves, and which Hardin, Rittel and Webber talked about, we need these principles because they have intrinsic value: they are ethical and moral. The principles stand firm regardless of the examples that critics may have up their sleeves of unsuccessful co-operatives and co-management as a proof that co-management and co-operatives are bound to fail. In other words, in poverty alleviation through collective action, one should be flexible and adaptive on organizational design – by learning from mistakes as well as successes; but, on the principles, one should stay firm.

For more

https://maritimestudiesjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40152-014-0016-3
Walking the talk: implementing the international voluntary guidelines for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries

https://www.springer.com/in/book/9783319550732
The Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines: Global Implementation

https://www.springer.com/in/book/9789400715813
Poverty Mosaics: Realities and Prospects in Small-Scale Fisheries

https://igssf.icsf.net/en/page/1069-SSF%20Guidelines%20Translation.html
SSF Guidelines Translated

https://igssf.icsf.net/en/page/1067-SSF%20Guidelines%20(Summary).html
ICSF's Summary of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication